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INQUIRY

Topic: HUNTING NAZIS

Rabbi Marvin Hier, 46, is dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, which has called for an intensified search for Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele. Hier, who founded Yeshiva University of Los Angeles and co-wrote and co-produced the Academy Award-winning documentary *Genocide*, was interviewed by USA TODAY's Gregory Katz.



Rabbi Hier

This is the year we must get Mengele

USA TODAY: Do you believe the United States government helped Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele escape?

HIER: We do not know all there is to know about the U.S. connection, that's for sure. Proof of this is the fact that suddenly the CIA has documents. There are many skeletons in the history of the Counter Intelligence Corps — the Army agency conducting intelligence after World War II. What we know about the background of the CIC is that they did those kinds of things. So it certainly wouldn't be far-fetched to assume that they had some use for Mengele.

USA TODAY: What are some of the leads you're following to find Mengele?

HIER: One trail that unfortunately is cold now because the person died is the Otto Skorzeny trail. Skorzeny was Hitler's commando and, after the war, I believe he was working for the United States. He was jailed after the war and his escape is suspicious — people dressed in U.S. uniforms got him out. Two years later, he came back to Germany, the place he escaped from. It's just not logical.

USA TODAY: And you believe he was connected to Mengele?

HIER: Skorzeny had tremendous clout. After he came back to Germany in 1948, he stayed for nine months in Bavaria. Joseph Mengele lived in Bavaria at that time, before he is believed to have left for South America, between 1949 to 1951. Mengele left Bavaria and went — some say — to Italy, Spain, and then to Argentina. We don't really know. But Skorzeny had set up Spain as his headquarters.

USA TODAY: Why would the USA have anything to do with Skorzeny?

HIER: Skorzeny had an assignment to help fight communism. He was useful to the United States in that respect. The question is whether there was a *quid pro quo*: "As long as you do our work, we'll let you carry on your little Nazi work on the side." Some say Skorzeny ran the escape routes that got Mengele and Adolf Eichmann out. If the USA knew all of his activities, because they were shadowing him around the clock, they would even know the names of the people that he was getting out, and that implicates them very deeply. That has never been proven, but it is a trail that is really worth a thorough investigation because it might lead to the conclusion that the United States knew everything Skorzeny was doing — and didn't act.

USA TODAY: Is it possible then, that U.S. officials at times knew where Mengele was?

HIER: Yes, they could have pinpointed where Mengele was in a second, but it wasn't in their interest to do so. They looked the other way, and that is an indictment. That's a very strong indictment.

USA TODAY: What are some active leads that may shed light on Mengele's whereabouts now?

HIER: There is a man named Ricardo Riefenstahl, who is in jail in Germany on drug trafficking charges. He's a professor from Paraguay, an expert in bees. There are two people who claim that Riefenstahl told them on two occasions that Mengele had stayed with him in 1979, 1980, 1981. Riefenstahl denies it, but if it could be substantiated that Riefenstahl is lying, it would also show that Paraguayan President Alfredo Stroessner lied when he said that Mengele hasn't been seen there.

You can't live that openly in Paraguay, file official papers, and not be known to the secret police.

USA TODAY: What else have you got?

HIER: There are tips that come in every day that have to be analyzed, and a lot of them are a waste of time. But some turn up something. The most important thing in the Mengele case, in the last 35 years is that he has always been the property of Nazi hunters. Today he's the property of the world, of the U.S. government, because the U.S. government has entered the case. I think there is a tremendous feeling out there that this is the year we've got to get Mengele, and that has been brought about by the USA's involvement in the case.

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